

Group Home Involvement in Transition Planning

Group Homes vary in the support they offer to foster youth as they transition out of care. HEY provides best-practice recommendations to better serve foster youth.

Background

Honoring Emancipated Youth (HEY) conducted a two-year Emancipation Research Project (ERP) examining the process of youth's transition from foster care to independence in San Francisco County. During interviews with 30 professionals and youth held from 2008-2009, HEY asked each participant if they considered any party to be absent from the transition planning process. Without being provided choices, about 80% answered that caregivers could be more involved in transition planning, in particular group home staff. HEY recognized this as a potential barrier to successful outcomes for youth, especially because San Francisco foster youth are increasingly being placed in group homes. To better understand how group home staffs participate in transition planning, HEY spoke with several staff members.

Do Group Homes Teach Youth the Skills They Need?

Many emancipation professionals interviewed spoke about group home rules as primary obstacles to preparing a youth for independent living. For example, some rules prohibit youth from doing laundry or using bleach in order to limit their exposure to chemicals. One Child Welfare Worker said, "I don't think the group homes do a good job preparing the kids for emancipation. Half the group homes have laws [rules] where they won't even allow the kids to cook because of liability. That's ridiculous."

The California Youth Connection found that 32.5% of youth in Alameda Group Homes felt that there is nobody helping them prepare to emancipate.

In order to substantiate claims such as these, HEY reviewed the laws regulating group homes and talked to group home staff about how they help a youth learn life skills. In the laws regulating community care licensing¹ and foster youth rights², there is no specific information about the right of a foster youth to do their own laundry. There is also no specific information on the caregiver's right to regulate these or other chores.

For youth in foster family homes, the law states that foster youth have the right to "be accorded the independence appropriate to the child's age, maturity and capability ...," but this right is not repeated in the law regulating group homes. This indicates to HEY that group homes have flexibility in deciding which types of chores are allowed or prohibited.

The head counselor at Hickman Homes I, reported that her group home co-workers do teach youth how to cook, to wash their clothes, and to spend money. In order to better understand this issue, HEY would need to speak with more group home staff, talk to youth about their experiences in group homes, and review other studies.

Some Group Homes Make ILSP Mandatory; the Law Defines Participation as a 'Right'

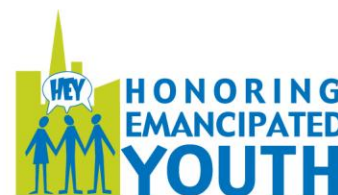
Although some regulations for group homes are unclear, there are regulations entitling foster youth the right to be involved in the Independent Living Skills Program (ILSP) at the age of 16 or older, according to the 22 CCR s 89372. In fact, some group homes mandate their youth to go to ILSP as a part of their own internal discipline program.

A staff member from Carpenter's Home, a San Francisco group home for young women, said in the 16 years she has been employed there, ILSP has been mandatory most of the time for youth ages 16 to 18. "ILSP is mandatory in our program because that's a 'must have' as a foster youth," she said. "Though they don't see the importance of it ... I've had people who were really resistant and two years later ... I've had them turn to me and say, 'thank you so much for making me go, because I would have no idea of what I wanted to [do].'"

In general, because of the myriad of skills and resources that youth are able to access while at ILSP, this policy of mandatory participation is likely contributing to their successful transition. However, *requiring* youth from a group home to attend ILSP creates concerns about the effectiveness of their participation. Because ILSP is required by residents at Carpenter's Home, their regular attendance may prohibit their involvement in other afterschool activities, such as a part-time job. Also, there may be additional disciplinary actions connected with ILSP and attendance that could inhibit their participation in other activities appropriate for their age. Nevertheless, HEY believes that ILSP is a critical connector to supportive services both in and after foster care. HEY supports group homes that encourage and facilitate ILSP participation, however believes mandatory policies must be administered carefully and appropriately. HEY believes that youth who attend ILSP often have more successful outcomes in transitioning out of foster care.

Some Group Homes Treat ILSP as a Privilege

In youth interviews, HEY learned that some group homes treat ILSP as a privilege to be taken away as a consequence for bad behavior. According to one youth, as a punishment for bad behavior, "One group home I was at ... It's like, 'You're going to stay home, then' and postulated the staff was implying, 'Watch everybody else go to ILSP and they're coming back, they're having fun.'" The youth added that he felt, "I'm like, is the group home that bad that ... to punish them you're not going to go to ILSP?"



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When HEY began to compare these practices to the policy, we saw that although group homes may develop their own rules for resident behavior, according to the 22 CCR s 89372, this punishment may be against the law. This law clearly states that all eligible foster youth have the right to attend ILSP.

HEY spoke with the Larkin Street program manager about foster youth's right to attend ILSP, and told him the youth's story (referring to a different group home), above. The manager said Larkin Street does not have mandatory policies, nor do they disallow youth from attending life skills programs at ILSP. They may, however, restrict youth from attending a "fun activity" at ILSP as a punishment. "I wouldn't say a youth couldn't do something [at ILSP], unless it was an optional fun activity. A lot of times we try and get the consequence related to the action," he said. He went on to say that Larkin Street neither restricts nor mandates ILSP participation. HEY urges that ILSP participation be encouraged and facilitated by all group home staff.

HEY believes that ILSP participation is a right that should not be removed nor mandated.

Strategies Group Homes Can Use to Encourage Participation AND Good Behavior

Improve Communication between ILSP and Group Home Staff

One strategy for increasing ILSP participation without either mandating or restricting attendance is to develop relationships between ILSP and group home staff. A longtime Carpenter's Home staff member reports she is in contact with ILSP staff at least three times a week. She said that because of this good communication, her staff receives informational flyers faxed directly from ILSP. Both youth residents and the group home staff attend many meetings or trainings that are offered. This close relationship between ILSP and the group home staff likely facilitates successful youth participation in the program, and allows staff the opportunity to educate themselves on the best strategies for transition planning.

Collaborate with Transitional Services Programs

Although HEY believes that ILSP should be the primary method for group homes to become involved in the emancipation process, group home staff may also facilitate a youth's involvement in other programs that assist them in transitioning out of foster care. One group home staff identified the Renaissance Scholars Program as another critical resource for emancipating youth. "It's a smaller version of what ILSP does – [youth] can usually do both."

Allow Flexibility for Staff's Role in Planning

Group home staff can be an excellent resource for youth in transition planning. Refreshing the skills of group home staff through outside programs like ILSP is important. It is also important and appropriate for staff to simply engage in emancipation counseling and in conversation with each youth. "My role is to provide the youth with the resources they need ... Sometimes it requires a little more of a push and we set up the appointments and that sort of stuff," said a Larkin Street staff member. Some youth may be more comfortable speaking with group home staff rather than an ILSP or other caseworker, and the group home should encourage these conversations to develop.

Group Homes Can Assist in Plan Creation

Finally, some group homes can actually help youth to create formal emancipation plans. However, multiple plans and multiple people assisting to create them can be beneficial or harmful for a youth. While it is good for youth to have choices in who assists them, if not coordinated, multiple and dissimilar plans from several different agencies may develop. Many ERP participants spoke about their experiences working with youth who had confused multiple plans for various aspects of their lives.

Share Information: Legal Requirements and Roles

The importance of clarifying legal responsibilities and roles was identified many times by participants of the ERP. Workers reported a lack of education about the responsibilities caregivers bear in preparing youth for transition. One worker said, "[A] social worker was telling me, well you know there are certain things that [caregivers] have to do, that they get paid to do, to make sure that this young person's doing, [of] which I had no idea." If workers were better informed of the law, they could hold the caregivers, including group home staff, accountable for properly assisting the youth.

Next Steps – And What We Can Do

HEY believes that all caregivers should be primary supporters in a youth's transition to independence. HEY recognizes that caregivers need not be specialists, but should be provided simple education so they can refer and facilitate access to ILSP or other programs. HEY also supports group homes hiring and training transition specialists to help guide planning, but still advocates for ILSP participation. HEY encourages all group home staff to have annual meetings with ILSP to refresh themselves about each other's programs and services. They should also have regular communication regarding new programs and policies, and upcoming events and opportunities. Various group homes and caregivers have different levels and interpretations of their relationship with ILSP and transition planning participation. HEY advocates for better training of all parties on best practices, clarification of legal responsibilities and roles, and constant communication between ILSP and caregivers.

¹ City & County of San Francisco, San Francisco Foster Children Placed in Group Homes (1998-2008), San Francisco Foster Care Demographics 1998-2009, July 2009

